special Central Assistance of Rs. 770 crores to that State for the financial year 1998-99 in view of State's share of expenditure on the economic restructuring project approved by World Bank; and

(b) if so, by when the assistance will be sanctioned?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF RAILWAYS, THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF PARLIAMENTARY AFFAIRS AND THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF PLANNING AND PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION (SHRI RAM NAIK): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) The Planning Commission could not accede to the request of the State government for Special Central Assistance. However, in approved scheme of financing of the Annual Plan 1998-99 of the State, the Commission has provided an additional amount of Rs. 400 crore under Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR)-based Net market Borrowing as matching share for implementation of Andhra Pradesh Economic Restructuring Programme. The release of this amount will be contingent upon absorption of World Bank aid by the State.

Conversion of Telephone Exchanges into Electronic Exchanges in Gujarat

*74. SHRIMATI URMILABEN CHIMANBHAI PATEL: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that all telephone exchanges in Gujarat will be converted into electronic exchanges by the year 1999 as per announcement made by MTNL;

(b) if so, the details of exchanges so far converted;

(c) whether the remaining exchanges will be converted by the end of 1999; and

(d) the details of funds so far incurred out of the fund sanctioned for the purpose?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS (SHRI KABINDRA PURKAYASTHA): (a) Yes, Sir. As per DOT policy all Telephone Exchanges in Gujarat will be converted into Electronic by 1999.

(b) 46500 lines of X-Bar Electro-Mechanical Exchanges has so far been converted into Electronic Exchanges during 1998-99 till 31-10-98 is as per details given below:—

Navrangpura-II	:	10000
Jamalpur	:	4500
Vasna-I	:	10000
Junagarh	:	8000
Surendranagar	:	7000
Vapi (Valsad)	:	7000

(c) Yes, Sir.

(d) There is no separate fund sanctioned for this item. Expenditure incurred for replacement so far is approx. Rs. 28 Crores.

Revamping of Planning Commission

*75. SHRI ASHOK MITRA: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) the number of vacancies yet to be filled in the membership of the Planning Commission;

(b) whether taking advantage of the present situation, Government would consider a drastic restructuring of the organisational pattern of the Commission; and

(c) if so, whether the advice of the Inter-State Council would be sought in this connection?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF RAILWAYS, THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF PARLIAMENTARY AFFAIRS AND THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF PLANNING AND PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION (SHRI RAM NAIK): (a) Planning Commission exists as per Government of India Resolution

of 15th March, 1950. There is no fixed strength of Members in the Planning Commission.

(b) and (c) It is proposed to bring in some functional changes in the working of the Commission in the context of implementation of the Economic Reforms so that the Commission could concentrate more on new emerging areas/trends. There is no proposal to seek the advice of Inter-State Council.

Performance of IREL

*76. SHRI PARMESHWAR KUMAR AGARWALLA: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that the physical performance of the Indian Rare Earths Limited has shown a declining trend during 1996-97 and 1997-98;

(b) if so, the reasons therefor; and

(c) what steps have been taken by Government to change this trend?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SMT. VASUNDHARA RAJE): (a) As compared with 95-96, there was a decline in production during 1996-97. However there was significant recovery during 97-98 resulting in higher production and better financial performance.

(b) The main reasons for decline in production during 1996-97 were:

(i) Agitation by the workers for about 4 months demanding payment of bonus to those not entitiled to it in one of the plants of the company, *viz.* Chavara.

(ii) Inadequate availability of raw sand for mining due to the resistance by the local inhabitants against the collection of beach washings at Manavalakurichi and Chavara.

(iii) Suspension of operation of the Synthetic Rutile Plant for modifications in the process parameters.

(c) An additional minerals recovery plant has been commissioned in Chavara which facilitated inland mining. Efforts to persuade the local inhabitants were continued for improving the availability of raw sand. Modifications were made in the dredge & wet concentration plant at the Orissa Sands Complex at Chatrapur in Orissa which resulted in a significant increase in availability of concentrates. An extensive research & development effort was undertaken to modify the process for synthetic rutile production which is expected to increase efficiency, simplify operation and reduce the cost of the production. The modified process has been evaluated and trial production is planned from January 99. A value added production plant, namely PRYNCE, for production of neodymium oxide (which finds application in production of permanent magnets), was also commissioned in 1997 in the Rare Earths Division in Always in Kerala.

Natural Calamity Releif Fund

*77. SHRI SANJAY NIRUPAM: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government propose to set up a Natural Calamity Releif Fund to provide relief in the event of natural calamities like floods, earthquakes etc. to the affected States;

(b) if so, the details of the scheme in this regard; and

(c) by when this fund will come into existence?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTERY OF AGRICULTURE (SHRI SOMPAL): (a) to (c) Such a fund came into being when the Ninth Finance Commission provided for the constitution of a Calamity Relief Fund (CRF) with an annual allocation of Rs. 804.00 crore for the period 1990-91 to 1994-95 with a separate existence from the general revenues of the State. 75% of the CRF was contributed by the Government of